

# DEVELOPING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

*Disruptive behaviour can seriously impede a student's academic progress. Don Jordan and Joanna Le Métais present some classroom strategies which promote emotional growth and appropriate social skills to help reduce classroom disruption and improve student time on-task.*

Readership: primary, secondary

## INTRODUCTION

As teachers, our objective is to enhance the academic and social progress of all students. In order to reduce classroom disruption and improve student time on-task, some teachers have adopted behaviour modification strategies such as assertive discipline (1). However, Goleman contends that focusing solely on academic development is not enough, because the inappropriate behaviour of particular students is often due, in part, to a lack of emotional intelligence (2). Therefore, unless emotional growth and social skilling take place, students pass from teacher to teacher ill-equipped to deal with their problematic behaviour.

Goleman defines emotional intelligence as:

- knowing one's feelings and using them to make good decisions in life;
- being able to manage moods and control impulses;
- being motivated and effectively overcoming setbacks in working towards goals.

Emotional intelligence includes empathy, knowing what others are feeling, managing emotions in relation to others, and being able to persuade and lead others (3).

Gardner described these intelligences as intrapersonal and interpersonal, where

*Intrapersonal intelligence ... is a capacity to form an accurate, veridical model of oneself and to be able to use that model to operate effectively in life. Interpersonal intelligence is the ability to understand other people: what motivates them, how they work, how to work cooperatively with them (4).*

## CLASSROOM EXAMPLES

MacMullin (1994) found that students' social and emotional difficulties, and their inability to use socially skilful ways to gain teacher support, can result in low academic achievement (5). During our teaching careers, we have encountered numerous students who provide clear examples of the effect on learning of inadequately developed emotional intelligence. Despite having academic ability and sound literacy skills, their academic performance and classroom behaviour nevertheless cause concern. They tend to display

problems with general organisation and presentation of work, and classroom behaviour which interferes with the progress of other students. In their relationships with adults, they engage in arguments to justify their behaviour or to avoid complying with a request. Despite their inadequate social skills, they may nevertheless express a strong need to be involved with others and, in rare cases, a threat to send them out of the class is sufficient to bring about an improvement in their behaviour. Accordingly, our preferred teaching style involves students' conducting much of their work in structured cooperative groups. It aims to minimise off-task behaviour in the short term and to promote students' social and emotional development skills in the longer term (6).

In this article, we present an overview of the teaching strategies adopted by the first author, under three headings, and identify ways in which they contribute to the development of emotional intelligence by:

- ◆ minimising disruptive behaviour by reducing confrontation;
- ◆ maximising on-task behaviour;
- ◆ helping students develop social skills.

## CONTEXT

The class used as the basis of this research comprises 26 students of mixed ability, aged 10–12 years. The school has a supportive school environment policy allowing students to develop intellectually, physically, socially and emotionally in a supportive and considerate atmosphere. The curriculum is structured to allow for individual abilities and strengths, so that within the same topic, different needs are met and achievements recognised. Opportunities are given for students to organise their day, within a prescribed framework, and to allow them to work individually or in groups, helping each other in the activities being undertaken. The day-to-day life in the classroom is intended to contribute to the development of a range of social skills.

The underlying teaching philosophy is that effective learning requires mutual trust between student and teacher, that students must feel free to take risks in their learning and that this can best be done in a supportive and friendly classroom.

## REDUCING CONFRONTATION

Goleman points out that the physiology of the brain means that learning and strong emotions compete for space in the working memory (7). Thus the emotions aroused by confrontation inhibit the learning of those directly involved, as well as disrupting the environment of other learners.

Three elements commonly give rise to classroom confrontation between a teacher and 'difficult' students. First, a lack of clarity about a teacher's expectations of student behaviour and performance. Secondly, because such students often lack both empathy and social skills, they may misinterpret a teacher's intentions, and normal interactions may be perceived as confrontational and stimulate an aggressive response. Thirdly, a teacher may react to the student's reputation rather than to the *actual* level of disruption. Such a lack of empathy may itself provoke inappropriate behaviour on the part of the student.

The following strategies, used to promote emotional growth and appropriate social skills, focus on three stages of teacher behaviour: setting the framework for acceptable conduct, developing a non-confrontational style and responding to any misbehaviour which occurs.

### *Setting the framework for acceptable conduct*

At the start of each school year, the class is guided through an exploration of the students' and teacher's rights and responsibilities, as a prelude to establishing a clear framework of expectations or 'rules of behaviour'. Arising from the right to learn/teach and to individual security and privacy, 'rules' typically govern communication, movement around the classroom, and respect for others' work and property. This approach involves the students in taking responsibility for creating and maintaining an effective learning environment.

### *Developing a non-confrontational style*

A non-confrontational teaching style includes the following characteristics:

- using a quiet and calm voice and avoiding finger stabbing and prolonged eye contact in general classroom interaction, thereby creating a non-threatening environment;



- using low-level interventions and walking around the classroom to maintain close proximity to students. This effectively causes some to return to their task and enables the teacher to correct misbehaviour discreetly and privately. In this way, the teacher models and reinforces the principles of the individual's right to privacy and respect for the learning environment.

- using humour and distraction, where appropriate, to reduce the tension and help students recognise the need to match their conduct to the situation.

In these ways, the teacher demonstrates empathy and appropriate patterns of social interaction so as to promote these skills on the part of all students. As students learn these skills, the incidence of confrontation between them also diminishes.

### **Responding to any misbehaviour which occurs**

Responses to misbehaviour which refer back to agreed expectations keep the focus of disapproval on the *behaviour* rather than on the *student*. Strategies include:

- making a statement such as 'That's an interesting choice!', followed by a gentle reminder of the consequences of that choice. This is often sufficient to cause the student to return to task and places the responsibility for behaviour where it belongs, with the student. Encouraging students to reflect on the consequences of their actions for themselves and others promotes the development of intra- and interpersonal intelligence;
- recognising that instant obedience is unlikely, and allowing time for students to respond, enables them to comply with the teacher's requests without losing face;
- refusing to engage in public arguments. For example, when a student calls out rather than requesting help in a more acceptable way, a teacher may tactically ignore the misbehaviour instead of formally correcting it. When this elicits secondary behaviour such as deep sighs, or remarks to others, such as 'I'm not going to do this, he won't even help you', the teacher may offer an opportunity for private discussion after class or calmly repeat the direction and move on to other students;

- providing an opportunity for the student to move beyond the incident and re-establish a positive relationship. This reinforces his/her understanding that the behaviour, and not the individual, is unacceptable.

## **MAXIMISING ON-TASK BEHAVIOUR**

There is a high correlation between on-task behaviour and learning. Off-task behaviour often occurs because students are not clear about learning objectives, or because they are unable to maintain their motivation or assess their need for, and effectively seek, help. The development of intrapersonal intelligence helps students take responsibility for their learning and thus maximises class on-task behaviour.

Within the classroom culture outlined above, effective strategies include:

- helping individual students to clarify the task in terms of specific, short-term goals within the overall objectives. These objectives may include social as well as academic goals;
- identifying, with each student, examples of his/her work which meet the standard ('work templates'), to serve as a guide. This procedure involves students in the (self-) evaluation process and develops their intrapersonal skills;
- helping students assess their needs, in terms of equipment and external help, and agreeing on ways of meeting them. This is supported by asking non-threatening questions ('Any problems?' 'Need any help?') as the teacher moves around the class, which also provides an opportunity for students to develop the social skills of asking for help;
- helping them develop an awareness of their performance in relation to agreed objectives and expectations, for example, by looking at work in progress and asking, 'How are you getting on? What should you be doing next?' Work rate can similarly be monitored by noting the time in the margin next to the student's work and checking back a short while later;
- jointly reviewing the performance of individual students. This helps them develop awareness of their achievements and strategies for building on their strengths and overcoming problems.

Throughout, the focus is on helping students learn proactively rather than simply 'doing what the teacher wants'.

## DEVELOPING SOCIAL SKILLS IN A COOPERATIVE ENVIRONMENT

Peer relationships can be viewed as the primary context for the social and emotional growth of the individual, because it is within these relationships that students develop the concepts of cooperation, mutual respect and interpersonal sensitivity, and experience companionship, intimacy and affection (8).

'Difficult' students often have strained relationships with peers and can be intimidating. The principal objective is to achieve a safe, effective learning environment, involving *all* students, because it is only within a social context that they can develop interpersonal skills. This may be achieved by:

- involving students in setting social as well as academic expectations and targets, for individual and group activities;
- making students aware of how their behaviour is perceived by others and how it affects others;
- helping students develop empathy and negotiating skills, to resolve conflict and promote their own and others' learning;
- monitoring each student's behaviour towards others, and their contribution to achieving collective objectives in the case of group work;
- in the event of inappropriate social interaction, temporarily relocating individual students to safeguard the overall learning environment. However, in these circumstances, it is a priority to make the student aware of the reason for his/her relocation, of its duration and of the behavioural changes required for re-entry into the group.

A teacher's ability to deal with problems firmly but with empathy reassures vulnerable students, whilst providing a model of acceptable, assertive interaction for the class as a whole.

## CONCLUSION

As with academic achievement, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence can only be developed over time. Moreover, this article has not dealt with the involvement of colleagues and parents/carers to develop coherence in expectations across the classroom, the school and the home. However, in our experience, even if limited to the classroom, a non-confrontational approach, which focuses on students' emotional as well as academic intelligence, has resulted in better task- and person-related behaviour. The more positive interpersonal relationships in the classroom have also carried over into the playground and resulted in a more relaxed and productive environment for all.

### Notes

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